

School of Theology at Claremont

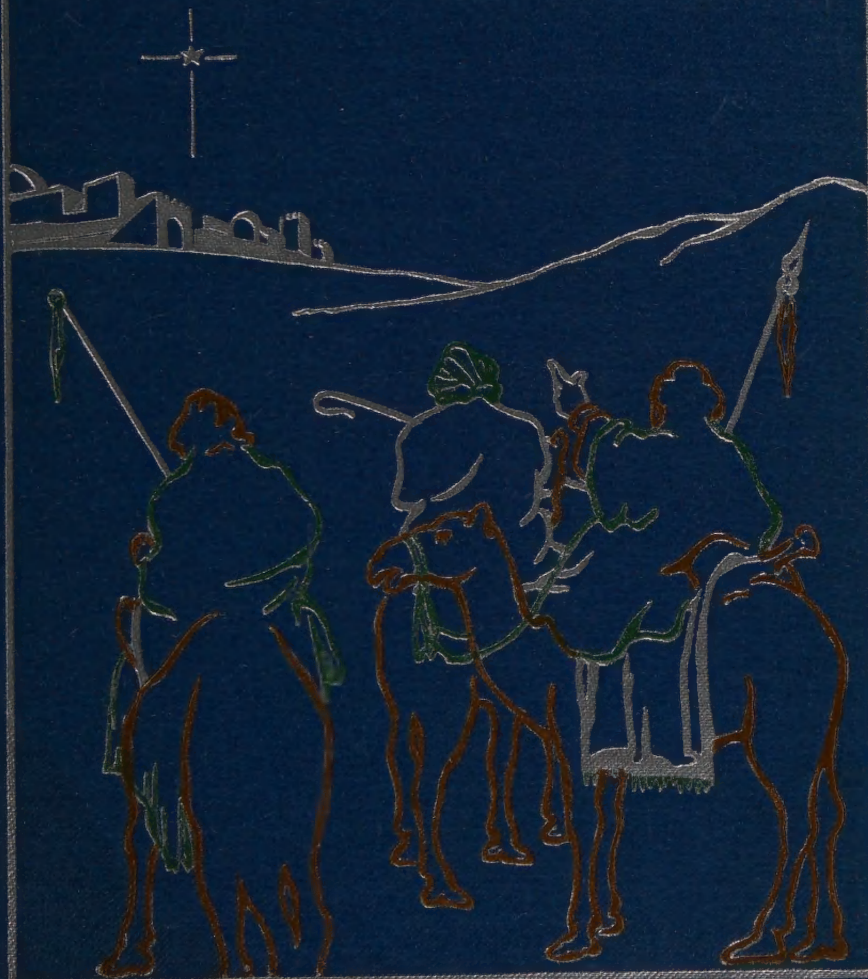


1001 1391067

ZERAH

A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

MONTANYE PERRY





Methodist
Historical Society

*Southern California-Arizona
Conference*

R. Burton Sheppard. 1977



The Library
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
AT CLAREMONT

WEST FOOTHILL AT COLLEGE AVENUE
CLAREMONT, CALIFORNIA



THE ADORATION

© 1912 Kalem Co.

Permission of Kalem Co.

3531
E77
24

ZERAH

A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

BY
MONTANYE PERRY



THE ABINGDON PRESS

NEW YORK

CINCINNATI

Theology Library
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
AT CLAREMONT
California

15-18696

Copyright, 1915, by
MONTANYE PERRY

Photographs used by courtesy of the Kalem Co.

TO MY MOTHER

CONTENTS

	PAGE
CHAPTER I	9
CHAPTER II	21
CHAPTER III	30
CHAPTER IV	43
CHAPTER V	53
CHAPTER VI	64
CHAPTER VII	73
CHAPTER VIII	82
CHAPTER IX	92

ILLUSTRATIONS

THE ADORATION	Frontispiece
THE SHEPHERDS	Facing page 26
THE WISE MEN	“ “ 36
JESUS IN THE TEMPLE	“ “ 62

CHAPTER I

"AH, my mother, I have found thee at last! I have searched the khan from gate to gate for thee."

Face flushed, blue eyes alight with expectancy, the lad approached his mother. She turned from the round, flat loaves which she was piling in orderly array on the freshly scrubbed shelf of stone, and laid a gentle hand on the bright curls which framed the eager face.

"Such a wonderful thing has happened," he began, happily. "I was watching with grandfather at the gates when my Uncle Nabor came up. He came for me. He says that I may go with him to spend the whole night with the shepherds on the hillsides. They build great fires to warm themselves and to keep wild beasts away. They sit around the blaze and tell strange tales and sing the old songs. So many times I have imagined it—hundreds of sheep huddled all soft and white on the green slopes, the young lambs bleating in the night, the stars overhead, the fires

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

flaring against the darkness—and now I shall see it!”

He broke off, a swift shadow darkening the joy of the young face.

“Dost thou not approve, my mother?” he faltered. “Thou fearest some danger? Surely no harm could come to me, with my uncle!”

“Ah, Zerah,” she sighed, drawing the boy close to her as she looked regretfully into his beseeching eyes, “it is not that I am afraid. I have no doubt that Nabor would care for my lad as tenderly as for his own. But to-night, as thou knowest, the khan is filled to overflowing with the travelers who flock to Bethlehem in obedience to Cæsar’s decree. On every side they clamor for water, for fresh straw, for coals—for all the things that travelers need. Many of them have journeyed far, and their supplies of food and grain are exhausted. They would buy from us—and some one must serve them. How can I do without my lad? No one can run so swiftly on the errands; no one has such deft fingers for all the little tasks. It grieves me to see thee disappointed, child, but without thee I am alone, for thy grandfather must keep the gates. Ah, if thy father had lived—if he had lived!”

“I know, my mother, I know!” His arms were

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

around her, his hands caressed the darkness of her hair. "I was wrong to think of leaving thee. In my excitement at thought of a night with the shepherds I forgot all else. I will hasten to my uncle and say that I cannot go to-night."

Bravely he hushed the trembling of his voice and shook the tears from his lashes ere he faced his uncle, who waited at the gates.

"Thou art a good lad," was Nabor's comment. "There will be other nights to spend with the flocks, and I rejoice to know thou art helpful to thy mother. Thy father would be proud of thee!" ||

"Thy father would be proud of thee!" The words rang sweetly in Zerah's ears. Dimly his memory glimpsed the fine, tall man who carried him to the sheepfold and stooped to let his tiny fingers touch the soft fleece of the lambs. Clearer was the picture of a night when gentle hands lifted him from his bed, to place him beside one whose white lips whispered, "Thou must care for thy mother, little lad—do not forget."

"My father knows," Zerah whispered now, with all the bright faith of youth; "he knows that I will not forget."

"Wait here in my place for a few moments, lad," said his grandfather. "I must have food. At the noon hour the crowd was so great that I

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

could not leave my place for an instant, and I am faint with hunger. See, I will slip the bar into place so that no one can force an entrance. Thou hast only to say to all who apply, 'The khan is filled to the utmost limit; we can admit no more.' "

"But what will the poor travelers do, grandfather?" The lad's face was troubled.

"They must make camps for themselves on the hillsides. See, already the slopes are whitening with their tents, and the smoke arises from their fires. All the afternoon have I been turning them from the gates—but we have done our best. The chambers, the courts, even the roofs are filled, and scores have been glad to take refuge in the cave."

"Yes, I know. Well, it is a fitting shelter. My mother says that many of our forefathers have lain there."

"True, lad. David himself doubtless slept in one of those old mangers many a night. Now watch; I will return in a short time. Mind, thou must allow no one to enter. They beg and make long arguments, but the khan will not hold even one more."

Left alone, the boy perched himself on the cedar block where the keeper had sat and looked out at the scene before him.

The short afternoon was drawing to a close.

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

Westward, the sunset touched the tall cliffs of the Mount of Paradise into faint flame. The distant peaks of Gedor and Gibeah were blurred by a mist which crept slowly downward, throwing a soft veil over the hillsides and the valleys and the far, broad sweep to the sea.

Wistfully, the lad's eyes crossed the terraced vineyards and the gray stretches of the olive groves; beyond them a path wound gently downward—a yellow thread against the soft green of the slopes. There lay the pasture lands, and, far along the trail, he could see tall forms moving steadily. One turned, with a sudden gesture backward, and the long crook that he carried stood out plainly for an instant against the calm horizon.

"It is my uncle and his men," sighed Zerah. "Well, I shall go with them some other time."

Resolutely he turned his eyes to the scenes near at hand. There was much to interest him in the confusion and bustle all around, even though it had continued now for so many days that he was becoming accustomed to the medley of strange faces, strange tongues, and stranger customs.

Here a dark-browed stranger, leading a string of fleet Arabian horses shouted shrill anathemas at a pack of curs that snapped at the prancing feet of his charges. There a gray-bearded

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

patriarch, camel-mounted, bargained shrewdly with a vender of fresh fruits. Women, discreetly veiled, divided long rolls of bread among their children, or carried jugs of foaming milk, fresh-stripped from the cows that grazed peacefully in the shade of the old walls, while their owners squatted beside them, collecting a goodly tribute of coin. And everywhere the plaintive bleating of young lambs, brought for sacrifice or for food, mingled with the plaintive crying of young children.

Twilight had brought a lull in the clamor for admission to the khan. Convinced that further parleying was useless, the late comers were dispersing in sullen groups to the hillsides, where space for their tents might be found. But still there were stragglers coming painfully up the steep Jerusalem road, and several times Zerah was obliged to say regretfully, "I grieve that the khan is filled; there is not left a space large enough for even one traveler."

"Curses on this business of taxation," growled a sturdy man, who evidently had traveled weary miles. "Here am I, obliged to come with my wife, my children, my servants, all this weary journey, because I chanced to be born in Bethlehem! Methinks that the great Cæsar might have found a

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

wiser way for his census-taking than ordering every man back to the town of his birth to be counted."

"What cares the great Cæsar for our convenience, so long as his coffers are filled?" returned his companion, bitterly. "Come, let us be off to the hillsides, lest we fail even to find place for a decent camp. If this lad speaks truly, 'twere useless to wait for parley with the innkeeper."

"Is it true that there remains no room in the inn?" said a slow, gentle voice, and Zerah turned to meet the eyes of a newcomer—a man about fifty years of age, whose grave kindly face was stamped with a look of deep anxiety.

"Canst thou not find a place for me, my lad?" the newcomer urged before Zerah could answer; "I am Joseph of Nazareth, of the line of David. This is the house of my fathers—surely it will shelter me!"

Zerah hesitated. A man of the line of David—no higher appeal could be made to one reared in the traditions of the Hebrew race! He slipped from his seat on the cedar block, and stood with troubled face upturned to the stranger's, as he answered:

"I give thee greeting. I, too, am of David's line, and it grieves me, as it would have grieved my

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

father, to be unable to offer hospitality to a kinsman. But, as thou mayest see, thousands of strangers have trooped into Bethlehem from every quarter, and there remains not the smallest place vacant within our walls."

"What shall I do?" the man muttered to himself rather than to the child whose eyes regarded him anxiously. "I cannot let my wife lie out upon the hillsides. The nights are chill upon these heights—she cannot bear it—she will die!"

"Ah, there is a wife?" queried Zerah, pityingly.

"Yea—and she is but a young and tender girl. She, too, is of David's line. Her parents were Joachim and Anna, of Bethlehem. Thy father must have known them in his boyhood. Ah, lad, there is reason—grave reason—why I fear for her safety if she is not sheltered from the dampness and chill of the night."

As Zerah would have replied, a woman who was seated on a donkey but a short distance down the path urged the beast nearer.

✓ "The Lord keepeth watch over his own, whether on the hillside or within sheltered walls, my husband," she said, clearly.

As the woman spoke she threw her veil aside, and Zerah gave a quick, astonished gasp.

"She is like the white angels of whom my mother

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

sings," he breathed. "Was ever such hair of gold, such heavenly radiant eyes!"

She smiled down at the boy and instantly his whole being was a-quiver with adoring admiration. The flush came swiftly to his cheeks, his slender form straightened, his eyes lit with sudden resolve.

"I know a place at the farthest end of the cave," he said, speaking to Joseph. "No one has taken it, because it is only a little corner, and it is hidden by great bundles of straw. But I know that there is an old manger where we can make a bed for her. It will be better than the hillsides."

"Blessings be upon thy young head," Joseph exclaimed, joyously, "a true son of David's line art thou! But the keeper—will he consent?"

"Since my father's death, my mother and grandfather keep the inn, together," Zerah answered, "and here comes my grandfather now. I will speak to him."

"I told thee that the inn was full," began the old man disapprovingly, when Zerah had told his tale in a few eager sentences. "We can take no more."

"But, grandfather," the lad whispered, "they are of David's line. And the woman is like an angel, so fair she is, and sweet, as a tall, white lily! Look at her face!"

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

The old man bent forward, peering at the woman with a sharp glance which softened into tender, half-bewildered awe as he gazed.

"The glory of her countenance!" he murmured. "It is indeed as the radiance of an angel. Yes, we must let them in."

Joyously, Zerah conducted his guests through the gates, along wide, paved passageways, and across a great yard where camels, donkeys, and horses were tethered in close groups while men of many lands kept silent watch beside them. Leaving the yard, they emerged upon a path that ran toward a bluff of gray limestone at the inclosure's western edge.

Nestling close to the face of the bluff was a low, narrow house, forming a covering for the mouth of a great cave which ran far back into the rocks. As the travelers passed through the doorway the light that streamed from an opening overhead revealed an uneven floor where great heaps of grain and fodder were piled. Along the sides ran mangers, built of stone and low enough for sheep. Grouped in every available bit of space were families engaged in preparing their evening meals, or in hushing little ones to rest in the straw-filled mangers.

Threading a path through the dimly lighted

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

cave, Zerah led the way to a far corner, where a bold jut in the rocks had left a small, curving aperture, filled now with bundles of straw.

"Look," he pointed, "it is a small space, but we can move the straw away and make room. See, there is a manger, as I said. Filled with the clean straw, with your warm rugs for covering, dost thou think that she can rest?"

His eyes went anxiously from Joseph's to Mary's. Her smile reassured him even before her clear voice spoke.

"It is far better than we had hoped to find. To be a little apart from the others; to have shelter and warmth and a place to prepare our food; it is all that we could wish, and we thank thee, little lad of David's line."

Zerah's face flushed at the touch of her hand; his eyes were glowing as he sought his mother.

"Please go to her," he begged, "and take a loaf of the freshly baked bread and a draught of thy drink that is so warm and strengthening. Somehow, I am sure that she is in need of care and sympathy. Her face is pale and her eyelids droop—but her eyes shine like stars."

"Thou art ever tender-hearted, my Zerah," the mother murmured fondly, "even as thy father was. It is well that thou foundest a place for them—

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

never hath one of David's line been turned from our door. But now there are many, many tasks that must be done. However, I will go to her, as thou desirest. Hasten to light the torches and to lay fresh fires, for the night comes swiftly on."

And as Zerah went about his duties it seemed that a soft touch lay on his hair, a pair of radiant eyes smiled into his, a gentle voice murmured, "We thank thee, little lad of David's line."

CHAPTER II

OUTSIDE the walls of the khan, just off the main-traveled road to the village, was an old well whose waters never failed. Many of the villagers went there, for the water was reputed to be purer and sweeter than any other. When fresh fires had been laid and every torch was flaring brightly, Zerah's mind, seeking some new duty, turned to the old well, and he nodded happily.

"I will bring a jug of fresh water for my lady in the cave," he said, and catching up a stone water jar he ran out past his grandfather, who dozed at the gates, along the path to the old well.

It was late evening now, but the stars were so bright that every object stood out clearly as in the light of day. As he neared the well Zerah saw that a young girl stood there, and he quickened his steps, his eyes lighting with pleasure.

"Ruth," he called softly, "wait—it is Zerah."

"How is it that thou comest for water alone at this hour?" he questioned when he stood beside her. "Is there no one in the village to bring water for thee?"

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

"My father is away to-night, watching his flocks," the girl answered. "And I am not afraid, for the night is as bright as the day. Were ever the stars so bright before? See how the hillsides sparkle and the gardens and orchards are turned to silver."

Silently they stood for a moment, looking down across hillsides and valleys, their young eyes filled with the beauty of the scene.

"Look!" cried the girl suddenly, "down there where the watch tower rises—where the shepherds watch their flocks! Dost thou see how the light of the sky seems to center there, as if the stars were gathering themselves together over the pastures?"

"What can it be? Some sign in the heavens?" wondered Zerah. "Ah, if only I were there! My uncle would have taken me to-night, but I must help my mother in the khan. And I must not linger—I forgot my duties when I saw thee, Ruth. I have such a wonderful guest in the cave. A woman with hair like gold and eyes like deep, blue pools lit by sunshine. Her voice is as the murmur of soft waters, and her face glows as if an angel had touched it and left heaven's glory there."

"Take me to see her," begged the girl impulsively.

"I will," consented Zerah, filling his water jug.

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

"Come, and if she is not sleeping thou shalt see her."

But as they turned their faces toward the khan, both children cried out in awed wonder.

"Look!" cried Ruth; "the splendor of the sky."

"It is some heavenly sign," sighed Zerah. "The glow has gone from the pastures; it hangs now above the khan!"

Along the path, which shone before them like a ribbon of pure gold, through the gates, past the sleeping watchman, they ran, and the path unrolled before them, stretching its golden way along the courtyard, adown the passageways, across the field, to the very door of the cave.

Over that door, so low that it seemed their hands might reach and pluck it from its place, swung a star of marvelous size and radiance.

"Some wondrous thing hath happened in the cave!" whispered Zerah, rapturously. "I said that the glow on her face was like the glory of heaven. Come!"

"Thou art not afraid?" questioned the girl.

"Afraid? From earliest times have the men of my race seen heavenly signs! Dost think that one of David's line feareth the visions when they come?"

Inside the cave all was quiet. The travelers

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

slept peacefully as they picked their way among them toward the corner where a light burned dimly. Suddenly from that corner came a faint, plaintive cry. They paused, listening.

"What is it?" whispered Zerah.

"It is the cry of a babe—a newborn babe," answered Ruth, softly.

Hand in hand, they stole nearer, until a tall form rose out of the half-darkness and the grave face of Joseph looked down at them.

"Ah, 'tis the lad Zerah," he said, kindly. "Come nearer—thou shalt see the babe. But for thee, his birth-bed would have been the hillside grass."

Wide-eyed, breathless with expectancy, they crept to the manger's edge. There, on the clean white straw, lay Mary, a tiny babe close-cradled on her arm.

"See the light in her eyes—is it not heavenly?" whispered Zerah.

"And the babe's face is as if the starlight touched it," breathed Ruth.

"Come closer, lad—and thou too, little maid," said Mary's clear voice, and as they knelt beside the manger she lifted the babe's wee hand and placed it on Zerah's curls.

"Remember, he hath laid his hand on thee," she said, and her voice thrilled with a sweet in-

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

tensity; "if ever he hath need of thee, Zerah, thou wilt not forget that thou wert the first to feel his touch." ✓ ✓

"I will not forget," promised the lad, wonderingly.

Softly they stole back past the sleeping strangers, the drowsing beasts, until they stood outside the cave's door, where the star swung, illuminating the whole courtyard with a roseate glow.

Those who had made their beds in the yard and upon the roofs were awakening, gazing with awed faces, and speaking in hushed tones.

"Shall we tell them of the babe?" asked Ruth.

"Nay," Zerah answered, and his eyes shone with an awed understanding; "be silent. The time has not come."

Back toward the gates they ran, but as they paused in the shadow of the old walls Ruth lifted her head, listening.

"Hark!" she said, "there are voices singing."

"'Tis men's voices—they are coming up from the hillsides toward our gates—let us hasten," said Zerah.

"It is the shepherds!" cried Ruth, as they neared the gates; "what brings them here at this hour?"

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

"Wait," said the lad, "we shall see!" And the glow in his young eyes deepened.

Up the trail from the pasture lands came tall men, clothed in the skins of beasts, with long, curved staffs in their hands. And as they came they sang, in strong, joyous voices:

Glory to God in the highest,
On earth peace, good will toward men!

"What seekest thou?" demanded the old watchman, waking at last, and peering with curious, dazed eyes at the singing band.

"We seek a newborn babe cradled in a manger," answered one, while the others hushed their song in a low, soft chant to which their swaying staffs kept time.

"It is my Uncle Nabor who speaks," whispered Zerah, as the children crept closer, unnoticed.

"What mean ye? There is no babe here; all the khan is wrapped in slumber, and hath been these many hours," the watchman answered.

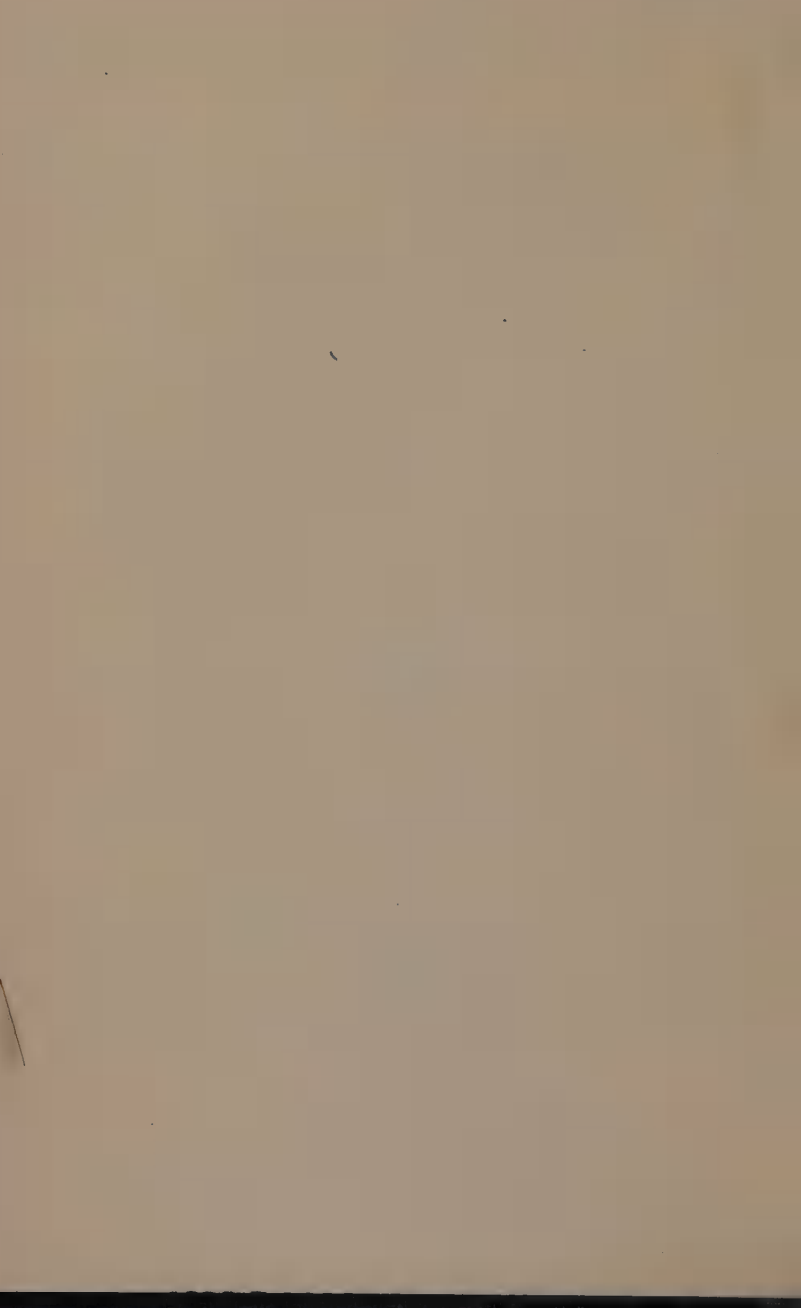
Over the faces of the shepherds a swift shadow crept. Their chant ceased abruptly. They looked at each other in startled questioning. Then Nabor persisted:

"Nay, it must be true! For, as we watched our flocks on the hillsides, the glory of the Lord shone



Permission of Kalem Co.

THE SHEPHERDS



ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

around us, and a voice spake from out the glory saying, 'Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. Ye shall find him wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.' And as we gazed, we saw that the glory streamed from the shining wings of angels who hovered above the pastures and sang,

Glory to God in the highest,
On earth peace, good will toward men!

"And when the glory had faded we took our way toward the khan, to see with our own eyes the Christ who is born this night."

"Nay," said the old watchman, peevish from his sudden waking and the strangeness of it all, "'tis a wild fancy! Why should ye seek the babe—if babe there be—in the khan?"

"There is in Bethlehem but one place which hath mangers—the old cave. And see the light that hovers o'er the khan—is it not a sign?"

"The stars are ever bright at this season"—the old man peered upward, blinking—"I see no change in them. And thinkest thou that the Christ shall be a babe, born in the manger of an old cave, on a bed of straw? What folly is this! Go back to thy pastures and thy dreams—I tell thee no babe hath been born here this night."

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

Then, as the shepherds stood with drooping heads, a slight form darted out of the shadows, with slender arm uplifted, beckoning.

"Come!" rang Zerah's voice, thrilling with exultant joy; "come with me. I have seen the babe—his hand hath touched me. Come through these gates, and see the wondrous star!"

Cries of awed delight burst from their lips as they passed through the gates into the inclosure whose high walls had shut from their sight the star, shining steadily over the door of the cave.

Chanting their song softly, they followed Zerah and Ruth to the manger where the babe lay on the mother's arm.

"It is the Christ!" breathed Nabor; "our eyes behold him!"

"It is the Christ!" they all echoed, and knelt upon the star-strewn floor.

The glory of the mother's eyes deepened; her face was as a still, white flame. She drew the babe close, close, till the tiny face lay like a white, star-kissed flower on her breast.

"Peace be unto thee," she said. "Thou hast seen the babe. Go back to thy flocks—wait!"

Silently, they filed across the field, over the paved court, through the gates, where they turned for a last look at the star.

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

“Our eyes have seen him,” they cried, joyously, and took their way, singing, adown the trail, toward the pastures where the white flocks huddled, waiting.

But, ere they went, Nabor turned to Zerah with a gleam of pride in his eyes.

“ ’Tis well thou wentest not to the pastures,” he said; “but for thee, the Nazarene would have sought shelter in vain; but for thee, we should have turned back from these gates, doubting the heavenly vision. Thy father would be proud of thee!”

“Ah, my father—he knows!” whispered the lad to his own heart, while the song of the marching shepherds drifted back, faintly sweet,

Glory to God in the highest,
On earth peace, good will toward men

CHAPTER III

“ZERAH, thy grandfather is not well. The strain of these long, care-filled days has been too much for one of his years. To-night his head is throbbing, and I fear that he hath a fever. His cheeks are flushed, and his hands shake with more than the tremblings of age.”

“It is rest that he needs, my mother,” Zerah answered soothingly, looking up into his mother’s troubled face with a smile. “Let him but have a long night’s peaceful sleep, and I doubt not that we shall see him at his best again. Give him one of thy good suppers now, and send him off to bed.”

“But the gates—who will keep the gates through the long night? All the men have gone with the sheep to the pastures.”

“I will watch the gates. Nay, do not look so doubtful. Most of the strangers have left Bethlehem. Few have knocked at our gates this day—fewer will knock after nightfall. Can you not trust me to watch the gates one night?”

“Trust thee?” The mother’s gaze rested lovingly on the boy’s upturned face. “Never hath

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

the heart of a mother put more trust in her young! But it is not fitting that one so young should be left to spend the long night alone, without sleep. And now that those who had honest business here have departed, the idle, vicious hangers-on of the crowd will linger, seeking mischief."

"No harm will come to me, nor to the khan, while I watch," said the lad, steadily. "Young eyes can watch as keenly as old ones, and if danger threatens young feet can run swiftly to bring help. But no danger will threaten. These prowling thieves are cowards—they run at the challenge of any voice."

"I like not to lay old burdens on young shoulders," protested the mother. "Thy father——"

"My father bade me care for thee," Zerah interrupted. "'Do not forget,' he told me—and I have not forgotten. Send grandfather to his rest, and forget to be anxious for me. Have you not said, many times, that I am not a child, even though my years are few? I will run to the gates now and tell my grandfather that his supper waits."

Without waiting for answer Zerah was off, running lightly across the paved court while the mother looked after him with eyes full of tender pride.

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

"No, he has not forgotten—he never forgets," she sighed. "Twelve years—and already the lad is as a man in thought and speech. I grieve to see him aged beyond his years! Yet his heart is the heart of a child. Well, he must keep the watch to-night—there is no other way."

On the huge block of cedar, just outside the open gates, Zerah sat while the sun dropped behind the tall peaks to the westward, leaving the sky aflame with crimson and gold. Up from the valleys the gray mists came creeping then, to meet the sunset, until over the hillsides lay a blending of radiance and shadow that deepened gradually into the smooth pallor of the twilight.

It was very quiet outside the old khan. Now and again the faint tinkling of bells floated up from the hillsides as some belated shepherd urged his flocks along. A few travelers straggled past, throwing a civil greeting to the lad beside the gates, but none asked for admission. The tide of travel, almost spent, was away from Bethlehem now. The census taking was done and the village had settled to its accustomed calm.

Darkness had fairly fallen when the lad dropped from his seat on the cedar block, went through the gates, and swung them together, slipping the bars into place and testing their

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

firmness with his young strength. Then, aided by a few roughly hewn steps, he climbed the wall, and stretched himself on its smooth, flat top, overlooking the approach to the gates without and the whole inclosure within. At the farthest side of the inclosure his eyes caught a glimmer of light from the cave, and his gaze lingered there.

"I hope that all is well with the babe," he murmured. "Such a sturdy little one it is! But ten days old, and so strong and rosy. And he knows me—I am sure of that, though my mother smiles when I say it. Always, he puts out his tiny hand to touch my face! If only they could stay with us—but Joseph is eager to return to Nazareth. To-day he would have gone, but Mary said 'Nay, the time is not yet,' and he yielded, as always, to her wish."

The hours crept by; the soft stirrings of the evening stilled into the utter silence of night, but the lad lay wakeful, every sense alive, his eyes searching the darkness unweariedly. It was a night of clouds, not a star showed—a night for prowling beasts and men, yet nothing came to break the solitary vigil.

Midnight came and went; far in the east a pale band of silver rimmed the world; somewhere a cock crowed shrilly; down in the pastures a shepherd

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

dog lifted its voice in sudden, vigorous alarm, and Zerah, whose eyes had been fixed on the faint light in the east, turned his head and sat erect instantly, with a low, wondering cry.

"The star!" he breathed. "Again it comes! What strange visitors will it bring to-night."

Low over the hillsides swung the luminous, moving star, illumining the steep pitch of the main-traveled road, and in its trail three tall, white camels stalked silently upward toward the old khan.

Nearer they came, and the star rose swiftly until it hung like a flaming beacon above the gates. Down from his place on the wall the lad slipped, flung wide the gates, and stood, awed but unafraid, his young face shining in the glorious light, one slender arm upthrown in greeting.

"Peace be unto thee," rang his voice clearly, and his eyes were wide with wonder as the white beasts knelt, and their riders, dismounting, bowed low and with one voice gave back the salutation, "Peace be unto thee and unto all within these gates."

Tall and stately and grave they stood before the lad, attired with all the wealth of Oriental splendor, the very tones of their voices betraying wisdom, dignity, and culture. Yet in their eyes

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

was nothing of pride, but only the eager wistfulness of intense desire.

"From the far East have we come," one said, as Zerah waited respectfully for their words, "led by yon lustrous star, which is a sign to us that an age-long hope is fulfilled. Over mountain and valley, desert and plain, we have faithfully followed the light, and lo, it hath led us to thy gates. Is there, peradventure, a newborn babe in the khan?"

"A newborn babe?" echoed Zerah, while the three bent toward him, their faces glowing with breathless eagerness. "Aye, the babe is here. Wouldst see him?"

A sigh of relief, of vast, speechless gratification came from their lips. With one accord they fell upon their knees and bowed their faces to the ground. When they rose, each dark countenance was transfigured with the light of joyous assurance.

"Now is the time at hand," breathed one gently, and the others nodded assent. "Wilt lead us to the babe, lad?"

"Aye, that I will," consented Zerah gladly, and stood aside as they filed through the gates, leaving the patient camels drowsing in calm content. His hands trembled with excitement as he

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

closed the gates and dropped the heavy bars into place.

"Again a wondrous thing is happening," he thought; "again I shall see some strange and glorious sight!"

But he had taken scarcely a step across the paved court when he paused, his joy dimmed by a sudden thought.

"The gates!" he faltered; "I am leaving them alone. I must not go. See, the torches burn brightly; you cannot miss the way. Down the passage there, across the yard, along the path to the mouth of the cave. Ah, if I could go—but I must keep the watch!"

"The Lord rewardeth the faithful," said the eldest stranger, laying a hand on Zerah's bowed head. "Keep thy watch faithfully, so shalt thou be blessed."

With a sob in his throat, Zerah climbed once more to his post on the wall. The blue eyes were misty as he turned them to the cave, but the mist dried instantly as his eyes dilated with the strangeness of what he saw.

The star that had swung above the gates was fixed now over the door of the cave, a brilliant gem in a setting of somber stone. The tall forms of the three strangers were silhouetted sharply for



Permission of Kalem Co.

THE WISE MEN

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

an instant against its circle of roseate light, as they lifted their faces to it with awed reverence, ere they bent and entered the low door.

Their stay in the cave was not long. The night was still black. The silver band in the east had broadened but a trifle when they emerged from the low door and stood for a moment in the star's light. And as they stood, the star quivered, moved from its setting, hovered for an instant above their heads, and dissolved into a mist of golden vapor, trailing upward, upward, a path of shimmering glory to the skies.

Reverently, the three strangers knelt on the hard-trodden earth, their heads bowed to the ground. Reverently the watching lad knelt on the old wall, his head bent to the brown stones. When Zerah lifted his face, the golden trail had faded, and the three strangers stood beside him, talking in rapturous, hushed voices.

"It is indeed the Saviour!" exclaimed one.

"The King who shall rule Israel!" exulted a second.

"Let us hasten to Herod with the glad news, that he may come and worship him also," suggested a third. "Open the gates, thou faithful lad, for it is needful that we depart with all speed for Jerusalem."

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

But the lad laid an impulsive, detaining hand on the arm of the eldest man.

"Nay," he begged, and his voice trembled with shy earnestness, "the night is dark. You have traveled far. Canst not tarry in the inn until the dawn breaks?"

They looked at one another, doubtingly. "Did not Herod say, 'Hasten to bring me word'? He will be ill pleased if we delay," one said.

"But even the great Herod sleeps," pleaded Zerah, "and thou hast need of rest. In the morning thou wilt go forth, in the bright sunshine, and thy journey will be made far more swiftly than now, in the darkness, weary and unrefreshed."

His voice was confident, his eyes glowed as with some inner light of understanding. The eldest stranger nodded with sudden decision.

"Methinks the lad speaks wisely, he said. "It is many hours since sleep hath touched our eyes. Let us rest in the inn."

"There, where the light shines from the window, sleeps my mother," said Zerah, pointing. "A loud knock will waken her, and she will give thee food and beds."

Alone on the wall again the lad stretched himself flat, his face to the east where the sky was slowly lightening. Below him the three camels slept

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

quietly, white ghosts in the darkness. Within the inn, the lights moving in an upper chamber told him that beds were being made ready for the strangers.

"Twice have I seen the star," he murmured, his thoughts racing on in happy confusion. "And now it has gone back to the heavens, as if its work was over. What does it mean? These wise men said, 'The Saviour is born—the King who shall rule Israel!' And the shepherds declared that the angels sang of a Saviour born in a manger. And the same star that led the shepherds guided the wise men from the far East—and I, a little lad, have seen it all! Ah, how glad I am that I knew of the corner in the cave where Joseph and Mary could stay! But for that, they might have sought the babe in vain. But what does it all mean?"

Wondering, musing, his mind a confusion of boyish dreams and of wisdom beyond his years, the hours slipped by until in the eastern skies soft splendors of rose and gold announced the approach of dawn. Then, across the yard, he saw a little procession approaching; Joseph, carefully guiding the steps of a donkey on which sat Mary with the little babe close-guarded on her breast.

"They are going!" thought Zerah, and his heart contracted with sudden pain. "Ah, the little babe,

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

and the mother with the angel face. I shall not see them any more. But why do they go so early, while all the world sleeps?"

"We wish to be well on our way before the full day breaks," said Joseph in his slow, grave way, answering the lad's unspoken question as they came up to the gates. "Here is a gold coin for thy mother."

"But my mother will be grieved if you depart without a word of farewell," Zerah said anxiously. "She loves the babe, even as I do. Canst thou not wait but a little while? In an hour the inn will be astir—or I will call my mother from her sleep now, if thy haste is so great."

"It is not best," Joseph began slowly, but Mary interrupted him. Bending, she placed a gentle hand against the lad's troubled face, turning it until the blue eyes met her own.

"Listen, little lad who found a place in the inn for us, who guided the shepherds and the wise men to our babe, who held the wise men here when they would have returned straightway to Herod. Thou shalt know our secret, for thou wilt guard it well."

"Is it best?" cautioned Joseph, hastily; "he is but a child."

"A child may have greater wisdom than a man, if the Lord send it him," Mary answered. "Re-

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

member, he was the first to be touched by the babe's hand. Have not all the events of the little life, thus far, been linked with the lad?"

"True," Joseph admitted. "Thou knowest best, my wife."

"Know then, Zerah," Mary went on, gazing deep into the lad's adoring eyes, "that an angel of the Lord hath warned us to take the child and flee into the land of Egypt, and dwell there, for Herod will seek the little life to destroy it. Therefore we go, and none shall know whither. Keep this in thine own heart, and when thou hearest strange rumors remember the child lives and may yet have need of thee."

"I would serve him—and thee—with my life, if need be!" declared Zerah, fervently. "And thou must keep the gold for thy own needs—my mother would not wish me to take it from thee."

"Nay," said Mary, "thy mother's love and care no gold can repay. But for the food and grain and shelter it is fitting that we recompense her, for we have received precious gifts this night. See, little lad—the gifts of the wise men!"

She drew her outer robe aside and disclosed a box of rare and precious workmanship, and when the lid was opened Zerah gave a cry of delighted admiration.

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

“Gold, and frankincense, and myrrh,” she whispered, touching her treasures softly, “the gifts of love and faith! Now thou must look once more at the babe, and then we must be gone, ere the full morning breaks and men are abroad to see us.”

She drew aside the filmy veil which shielded the babe’s face. It stirred in its sleep, and a wee hand, out thrown, rested for an instant on the lad’s bright hair. Through a blur of tears Zerah whispered, “Good-by. I have no precious gifts, but I will give thee love and faith.”

“And the greatest gifts of all are they—love and faith,” Mary’s voice came sweetly, as the little procession moved through the gates and took the road which wound southward adown the hills.

CHAPTER IV

FULL day broke over the mountain's brim. The gray mists fled before the flood of sunshine, the frosted hillsides glittered with myriad points of dancing light.

There was a stir of life in the pastures—the merry jingling of many bells, the deep-throated, reassuring bark of the dogs, the sweet, high notes of the shepherds' calls, clearly audible through the calm morning air.

Life began to appear, too, on the highways. Little caravans of travelers came from the village gates and set out on homeward pilgrimages. Traders fared forth toward Jerusalem, eager for the day's business, urging their laden donkeys along with weird cries of "Un-nh! Un-nh!"

The old khan, too, awoke, and Zerah, with a little sigh of relief, came down from the wall, and turned to greet his mother who was hurrying toward him.

"My poor lad!" she said, "thou hast had no rest. But thy grandfather is well again. The night's sleep has restored his strength, even as

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

thou saidst. And thou hast kept the long watch faithfully."

"And none came seeking shelter except the three strange men of the East?" she went on, questioningly, "and no prowlers were abroad?"

"I saw none," Zerah answered, "and the three men of the East, do they sleep?"

"Yes, at the third hour after the sunrise they bade me have them awakened, that they may hasten toward Jerusalem. Here is thy grandfather, ready to take the gates. Come and eat, my son, and go to thy bed; thou hast need of rest."

It was long past midday when Zerah awoke and lay thinking of the night's events.

"Ah, the strange things that I have seen and heard!" he sighed, "and I must not tell where they went—I must be faithful to my trust."

"Zerah!" his mother's voice interrupted his thoughts, as she entered the room. Her face was flushed, and her manner, usually so placid, showed a troubled agitation. "Joseph and Mary and the little babe have gone from the cave—they are nowhere to be found. Didst know of their going?"

"Yes. They went with the first faint light of dawn. Here is gold which they left for thee; and they left, too, their love and thanks for thy care of Mary and the babe."

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

"Ah, why did she not tell me she was going? I loved the babe so!" lamented the mother; but Zerah with a question turned the current of her thoughts.

"The wise men—what of them?" he asked.

"They too have gone, but not to Jerusalem. They rode off to the eastward; but they left a message for thee, my lad."

"For me?" Zerah's voice trembled with excitement.

"Yes—and I was so proud and glad! For they said that they tarried in the inn at thy behest, and as they slept they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, but to depart into their own country by another way. 'Give to the lad our blessing and our thanks,' they charged me, 'for his young eyes saw that which was hidden from our older ones, and his counsel prevailed upon us to our good.' What meant they?"

"Only that I begged them to tarry in the inn for the rest which they needed," Zerah answered, modestly; but his blue eyes were dazed, as if he peered into far, vague mysteries.

"Now Herod will hear no news of the babe—he will wait for the return of the wise men. And while he waits, Mary and Joseph will reach their land of safety," Zerah told himself. "But what can it

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

mean? Is the babe indeed the promised Saviour—the King who shall deliver Israel? Then why do not the doctors in the temple know of his birth?”

In the days that followed, the lad pondered in his young heart the things which he had heard and seen. Like all the youth of his race he had been well drilled in the history and traditions of his own people. The coming of a Saviour—a King who should redeem Israel—was no new thought to him. How many times had he chanted, in the synagogue, the ancient prophecies:

There shall come a star out of Jacob,
And a scepter shall rise out of Israel!

And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse,
And a branch shall grow out of his roots!

And the one that Zerah loved best of all:

And thou, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
Art not the least among the princes of Judah,
For out of thee shall come forth a governor
Which shall rule my people Israel!

“But this wee babe, born in a manger, cannot be the Messiah,” he reasoned. “Israel’s King shall come in glory—and yet the babe’s coming *was* glorious, if men could have seen! The wondrous star, the angel songs, the great white camels, the strange, stately Orientals with their precious gifts! But who saw all these wonders? Only a

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

few simple people in the inn; myself—a little lad; and a band of shepherds on the hillside! How shall the world ever know? If I should tell to the doctors in the temple the things that I saw they would rebuke me and say, ‘Thou slept on the old wall and dreamed.’ I will be silent and wait.”

A week had passed when Zerah, going to the old well for a jug of fresh water, found Ruth filling her pitcher there.

“Where hast thou been for so long a time?” he asked her, gravely, taking the pitcher from her hands and resting it beside his own jug on a ledge of stone. “It is many days since thou camest here—and I miss thee very much.”

“My father went to Jericho, where he has kinsmen,” the girl answered, flushing a little at Zerah’s words, “and he took me with him. It was a pleasant journey, and my aunt was kind to me—but I am glad to come home. I missed my mother and my brother.”

“And me, Ruth—didst not miss me?” the lad urged, bravely.

“Yes, I missed thee too, Zerah,” she answered, with simple frankness. “And now tell me of the little babe and the mother. Are they in the khan yet? And what do the shepherds say concerning their vision?”

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

"The shepherds say nothing, except to repeat what we heard at the gates that night," he answered. "And Joseph and Mary have gone with the babe—it is seven days since they left us. Ah, we were sorry to have them go!"

"I, too, am sorry—I feared that I should not see the babe again. I knew that the Nazarene would be anxious to return to his home when the mother was strong enough," sighed Ruth, and a look of relief crept into the lad's eyes. More than his mother's questioning he had dreaded Ruth's insistence. He spoke hurriedly now, to divert her thoughts from the babe's going.

"Look at the band of horsemen down on the Jerusalem road," he said, pointing. "They are soldiers—see their armor glitter in the sun."

"They are turning their horses up the hill!" cried Ruth, with quick fear in her tone. "They are coming to our village, Zerah."

"There, there, do not be afraid," he said, soothingly. "Doubtless they come for the report of the census, or on some business of taxation. These are peaceful times; we have nothing to fear from them."

Along the steep pitch of the Bethlehem road the horses filed, straight toward the village gates which were but a few rods beyond the old well.

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

"How grim their faces are!" whispered Ruth, as they came nearer.

"A soldier's life is a grim business," Zerah answered, his eyes dwelling in boyish fascination on the strong, stern men in their dazzling armor, until the last one had disappeared through the gates.

"I must go," Ruth said, catching up her pitcher. "My mother will be afraid, if she sees them from her window, and she is all alone. Come with me, Zerah."

Longing to see more of the soldiers, Zerah lifted Ruth's pitcher to his shoulder and followed her toward the village gates, saying reassuringly, "Why dost thou tremble? There is nothing to fear. The soldiers have no quarrel with us—ah, what is that?"

His voice died, suddenly, and his face paled. The pitcher slipped from his shoulder to the ground with a crash, and the fragments lay unheeded, as he seized Ruth by the hand and drew her swiftly into a crevice of the wall, in the shadow of the open gates.

For the stillness of the morning was rent, suddenly, by the clamor of brazen trumpets. Hoarse cries of rage and thick, vehement commands were mingled with the clash of steel, the shrill, panic-stricken screams of children, the terrified shrieks

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

of women, rising to piercing, long-drawn wails of utter, hopeless anguish.

"What is it—what are they doing? O, I must go to my mother," sobbed Ruth, but Zerah held her back.

"Wait," he begged, "wait here until I see—I will return in an instant."

Nimble he climbed to the top of the wall, gazed for a moment, and descended, his face as white as death itself, his eyes dazed with horror.

"They are killing all the children!" he shuddered, "all the little ones—the older ones go unharmed. They seize them from their mothers' arms—their swords drip with blood—O, it is fearful, hideous—thou must not see!"

He seized her by the arm and began dragging her along the path toward the khan.

"Thou must not go through the gates—thy mother would not wish you to!" he declared firmly. "No, Ruth," as she struggled against his strong grasp. "I tell thee it is no sight for thy eyes—thou must come with me—thy mother is in no danger."

By the gates of the khan stood Zerah's mother, and the old grandfather, listening, horrified, to the sinister sounds which floated down from the village. The mother arms held Ruth and Zerah

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

tightly, as the lad stammered forth the awful sight he had seen from the village wall.

"Why, O why, should they murder babes?" he sobbed. "What harm have they done—the tender little ones? It is the littlest ones of all that they take, my mother!"

And now from the village gates flashed five of the soldiers, armor blazing fiercely, swords unsheathed and dripping, bearing down upon the gates of the old khan.

"Entrance—in the King's name!" they cried, and rushed past the trembling little family into the court. Soon they emerged again, more quietly, sheathing their swords.

"There are no babes here," said one. "We might have spared the trouble."

"But woe to us had we left one alive in the borders of Bethlehem," declared another.

"Why do you this monstrous thing—wilt tell us?" rang Zerah's voice, fearlessly.

His mother's arms tightened around him in terror, but the soldiers, reining their steeds, looked into the fair, bold face, and laughed boisterously.

"Why? Because we must, my lad. When thou art a soldier thou wilt do as thy king commands. Dost think that a soldier says 'Why' to his king?"

"And what was thy king's command?" persisted

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

Zerah, though his mother would have hushed his words, lest they offend.

"That we slay all babes in Bethlehem and the borders thereof, from two years old and under. Doth that absolve us from thy wrath, thou young inquisitor?" laughed one.

"Let me tell thee that the task was not relished," declared a dark-browed one, fiercely. "I have babes of my own in Jerusalem! But who am I to question Herod's decree?"

"Ah-h!" Over Zerah's face swept a look of sudden, amazed understanding. "I thank thee for telling me—I pity thee in thy cruel task."

And as they swept away again to join their mates, Zerah turned to his mother, his face illumined, his eyes dark with wonder and awe.

"'Tis well that Joseph and Mary had left us," he said, simply; "had they been here, the babe would have been slain."

"But why is Herod's wrath upon the little innocent babes of Bethlehem?" asked Ruth, shuddering.

"Ah yes—why should he hate the little babes?" sobbed the mother. "What harm could they do him?"

But Zerah answered not a word, though in his young eyes the awe and wonder deepened.

CHAPTER V

It was late afternoon in the Holy City, and the Feast of the Passover was at an end. A steady stream of travelers poured from the city's gates, and all the roadways, far as the eye could reach, were lined with companies of pilgrims who hastened on eager to reach some fitting spot for the night's encampment before taking up the journey to their distant homes.

Always it was at the Joppa gates that the heaviest tide of travel ebbed and flowed. This afternoon the great open space around those gates was a picture of bright, eddying confusion. Stately camels and gray mules, patient little donkeys and sleek Arabian ponies waited stolidly or pranced impatiently under their burdens of silks or spices or homely household goods.

Venerable rabbis, surrounded by dignified companies of those who had devoutly kept the annual feast of their nation's birthday, looked askance at the bands of Romans, Greeks, and Ethiopians who had seen in the sacred festival an occasion for trade or for merrymaking.

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

There was much pushing and crowding, much barking of dogs and screaming of children, much vociferous shouting in many tongues as one caravan after another separated itself from the tangle and moved off on the main-traveled highway. And still from within the gray walls the tide poured so steadily that the confusion of the square was augmented rather than decreased.

Over by the south wall a little band waited, scanning the outcoming throng eagerly, and glancing at one another from time to time with words of impatience. There were only a dozen of them, devout Jews of the humbler class, each carrying the staff and the bundle slung from the shoulder which showed that their journey was to be on foot, hence that their homes were in some of the villages not far from the Holy City.

"Let us delay no longer," said one, looking up at the sun, already touching the western peaks of the mountains that rimmed the city. "Ruth is with Zerah. They have lingered to watch the crowds in the market place. But the way across the hills is familiar to Zerah. Why should we linger when our homes and our flocks are calling us?"

"I promised Ruth's mother that I would have a care for her," said a woman doubtfully.

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

"Is not Ruth a woman? And is not Zerah a man grown? And doth not her mother know that he will care for her?" questioned an elderly man impatiently. "Let us be off. Doubtless they will overtake us before we are well on our way."

"Nay, they will not overtake us," said the youngest of the women with a quiet smile. "When lovers walk in the cool of the evening, they hasten not their steps to win the companionship of their elders. Hast never been young, Nabor?"

The impatient one smiled grimly. "I have been young," he admitted, "and my heart is with Zerah. He is a rare youth! How often I wish that my brother might have lived to see his son a man of such rare judgment and strength! We will go on our way; they will follow in their own time."

Without further speech the little company moved off and, turning to the left, took the road to Bethlehem, while within the city walls the pair whom they had been discussing strolled about the crowded market place, enjoying the strange sights, oblivious to the setting sun and the homes that awaited them.

The twelve years that had elapsed since the boy Zerah kept his watch on the wall of the old khan had changed the slender figure to a form of tall, muscular manliness. The golden hair had

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

darkened somewhat, and straight, neatly kept locks replaced the tangle of curls that had framed the rosy face. The Cupid's bow of the red mouth had straightened to lips which were firmly set, and the soft, round chin had thinned and squared to a jaw that denoted a strong, determined will. But with it all, the blue eyes looked out from their dark lashes with much of the eager light of boyhood, and voice and manner held the fresh buoyancy and trustfulness of youth.

Ruth had rounded into maturity, retaining the slender gracefulness of girlhood. The hair that had fallen in rippling masses over her shoulders now encircled her face in smooth plaits. The cheeks had lost their full warmth of color, and her eyes, dark and lustrous, accentuated the slight paleness of her complexion. Sweetness of spirit, pure devotion, and abundant capacity for self-sacrifice were written in the lines of the firm yet tender countenance.

Zerah glanced at her, fondly studying her face, which was all alight with eager interest in the scene before her, as he spoke.

"We must be thinking of our homeward journey. See how low the sun has sunk. Doubtless our party has gone on before us, and thy mother will be anxious if we fail to follow."

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

"Yes, we must go," she assented, "but I love to stay here, Zerah. How full of life and animation the whole scene is—so strange and interesting! And it will be a year before we come up to the feast again."

For another moment they stood scanning the market place, where men, women, and children vied with one another for patronage, in the stirring, picturesque rivalry of the Eastern mart.

Here a man cried his stock of vegetables—lentils, cucumbers, and onions, fresh from the gardens of Galilee. There knelt a shaggy, raw-boned camel, its saddle laden with baskets of fruits—grapes, dates, figs, and pomegranates, plucked but the day before from the orchards of the Kedron. In the corners, women sat with their backs against the stones of the old gray wall, intoning the praises of their wares—honey of grapes in earthen jars, or stronger wines in leathern bottles.

Up and down, in and out, everywhere, stalked the peddlers of jewelry, their sharp faces peering out from huge white turbans, their keen eyes alert for the slightest show of interest in their gaudy wares. And over all rang the blatant uproar of the dealers in animals, screaming, coaxing, tugging at the halters of reluctant, struggling

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

beasts who added their clamoring protestations to the din of their masters' voices.

Reluctantly, Ruth turned at last, slipped her hand into Zerah's, and together they threaded their way between the lines of venders, past the rows of fascinating booths, toward the less crowded spaces outside the circle of trade.

They came out into a tolerably wide court where many of the city's narrow lanes and alleys converged, and a broad passageway led up to the Temple, terraced with snowy marble and roofed with gleaming gold. There they paused for a moment, with reverent thought for the holy feast of which they had been partakers, bowing their heads for a moment toward the East, where the first touch of twilight blurred the outlines of Olivet.

"Look, Zerah," Ruth said, as she lifted her head. "There are some travelers coming back to the city. They have lost something—see how anxiously they look around them."

As it was a time of general unrest in the city, the sight of these travelers, so evidently returning on some anxious quest, was not sufficient to arouse interest in many minds, but to Ruth and Zerah, unaccustomed to the life of the city streets, the strangers were objects of more than passing

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

curiosity. Involuntarily they drew nearer to the man and woman, who had stopped and were peering down a lane where a score of children shouted in some noisy game. Suddenly Ruth gave a startled exclamation and clutched Zerah's arm with eager excitement.

"Zerah," she cried, "it is Mary—the mother of the little babe in the manger!"

Bewildered, Zerah stared, his mind hesitating to grasp what Ruth's woman-eyes had glimpsed so swiftly. Then, as the woman turned from her scrutiny of the lane, and he caught a full view of her face, his eyes filled with an amazement as great as Ruth's own.

"It is indeed," he gasped; "it is Mary and Joseph!" and together they ran toward the newcomers.

For an instant Mary looked into the faces of the pair who stood before her, breathless with joyful excitement, then she smiled, and stretched out both her hands in greeting.

"It is the little lad of Bethlehem—a grown man!" she said, "and the little Ruth, a woman! We have not forgotten thee, Zerah. How many times we have spoken thy name—and I knew that some time the Lord would bring thy feet again to the pathway of our lives."

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

From her eyes to Zerah's there flashed a glance of reverent understanding, and his eyes gave back the look before he turned to Joseph with courteous respect.

"Thou hast lost something?" he questioned. "I would gladly be of service."

"It is the child who is lost," said Joseph slowly, "and we know not where to seek him."

"The child—the little babe?" cried Ruth, wonderingly.

"Yes," it was Mary who answered, "the little babe—a fine, brave lad now of the age that Zerah was when my babe lay in the old manger. Three days ago we brought him up to Jerusalem for the feast. This morning we started on the homeward journey, supposing him to be somewhere among the other lads in the caravan. But when we came to the first place of rest, we looked among all our kinsfolk and the families of our acquaintances and found him not. Hence have we returned seeking him."

"Thou art afraid for him!" cried Ruth sympathetically, but though Joseph nodded troubled assent, Mary's eyes were calm and fearless.

"Nay," she said, softly, "no harm shall come near the lad—but we must find him; under our care must he abide and grow—his time is not yet,"

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

and again Zerah's eyes met hers with a flash of awed comprehension.

"Let us go up to the Temple," Zerah suggested, now. "It may be that he lingers there among the teachers, listening."

"He is too young for so great an interest in learned disputes and doctrines; more likely he lingers with other lads at some new game," said the father with a touch of grimness, but Mary caught at Zerah's suggestion eagerly.

"The Temple is near; let us go there," she begged, and Joseph with the slow, indulgent smile which his face so often wore for her, nodded consent.

Up the straight street to the Temple area, down along the grassy terraces below the marble house where the teachers of the sacred law often sat in the late afternoon, they followed Zerah, until they saw, clustered close together, on the broad marble steps, a company of the learned doctors. Their uplifted faces were grave and intent, as if they listened to that which was of absorbing interest, and they gave no heed to the strangers who approached and stood for a moment, looking down at them, and from them to one another, in startled questioning surprise.

For there were assembled the wisest men of their

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

time, men whom all devotees of the Temple knew by sight, and in their midst stood a slender, fair-haired lad, his upturned face shining with a glory which seemed more than that of the setting sun, his young voice ringing out clearly, in words to which the learned doctors gave awed, respectful hearing.

A moment they stood there, silent. Then, with a little cry of mingled joy and reproach, Mary ran forward, drawing her boy close in the circle of her arms.

"Ah, my lad!" she sobbed. "Why didst thou deal with us so? We have sought thee, sorrowing."

Over the fair, boyish face there swept a look of love, and the young eyes glowed with a light of tender, sympathetic understanding. His hands touched her tear-wet face, caressingly.

"How is it that ye seek me sorrowing?" he asked, gently. "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?"

"But thou art my little lad," she wept; "the time is not yet."

Nodding grave assent to her words, he turned to the doctors with decorous words of farewell, and with slim hand resting lovingly on his mother's shoulder he went with the others across the ter-



Permission of Kalem Co.

JESUS IN THE TEMPLE

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

paces, down the long flight of steps, until they stood outside the Temple area. There they all paused, and his mother spoke:

"See, my lad," she said, "here is Zerah of Bethlehem, of whom I have so often told thee. He came upon us by chance, and he it was who led us to the Temple, to find thee with the doctors."

The boy's eyes widened with surprise. "So thou art Zerah—and again thou hast helped my parents in their need," he said, stretching out his hand to clasp Zerah's, impulsively. "I thank thee—and we shall meet again."

And as Zerah took the proffered hand there ran through his veins a strange, sweet thrill such as he had never known—a thrill of wonder and awe and love, a faint, dim premonition of marvelous things to come.

CHAPTER VI

THE glow of the sunset had faded when Ruth and Zerah turned from the Joppa Gates into the open country, and made their way down the rugged road into the Valley of Hinnom, where only the straggling growth of the wild olives or the tangled thickets of mulberry broke the barrenness of the way.

Both were silent during the descent, for although Zerah's hand was ever ready to help Ruth along the rough places, his manner was abstracted, as if he thought of far off things, and Ruth, seeing this, forbore to break his thoughts with idle speech.

But when, ascending a long, gentle slope, they skirted the Plain of Rephaim and came out upon the elevation of Mar Elias, they paused and stood, hand in hand, looking across the valley to where the lights of Bethlehem began to twinkle through the gathering dusk.

Below them in the valley the mist lay like a smooth, white sea; beyond, the everlasting hills stretched into the darkened distance; above, the

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

stars pricked through in swift succession, until the sky was spangled with points of lambent flame; a thin crescent of a moon slipped out, and in its wake a guardian star trailed, clear and lustrous.

"Dost remember the wondrous light that hung above the pastures yonder?" Zerah asked, softly, "and the star that flamed above the khan, and the radiance of the mother's face?"

"Yes, I remember," Ruth answered. "If all the light of the heavens to-night were rolled into one flaming star it would not compare with the glory which hung over Bethlehem that night."

"Didst notice the light on the boy's face, as he talked to the doctors in the temple?"

"The light of the setting sun touched his face," said Ruth, her thought, as ever, more prosaic than Zerah's.

"'Twas more than sunlight—wherever he cometh there is radiance," murmured Zerah, and fell into a silence which lasted while they went down the gentle slope into the valley, past the tomb of Rachel where stone sentinels shone through the gloom, up the fertile, terraced slopes of the vineyards, until they stood in the road which wound southward, below the walls of Bethlehem.

"Art tired, Ruth?" he asked then. "Have I

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

neglected thy comfort, with my wandering thoughts. I fear the walk has not been so pleasant as I should have made it."

But Ruth's smile was tender and unaccusing. "All walks are pleasant with thee," she said, with a simple directness that was yet full of maidenly modesty.

Over Zerah's face flashed a look of adoration. "Always thou understandest, my Ruth," he said gratefully. "Never was man so blessed in the love of woman as I am in thine. And when the harvest comes once more, it shall bring our wedding day, shall it not?"

"Yes," whispered the girl, "yet sometimes I fear! My mother is always ill, thou knowest, and her heart is bound up in me, her only daughter."

"I know," he murmured tenderly, "but have I not told thee many times, that thou shalt be all to her that a daughter can be, so long as her life shall last? 'Tis but a few moments running from the khan to thy father's house. Daily, hourly if thou wilt, thou shalt see her. Thinkest thou that I, of all men, would teach thee to neglect thy mother? Was not the last charge of my own father, 'Thou must care for thy mother, little lad; do not forget!' And I have not forgotten—nor would I have thee forget thine own duty."

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

"Thou art so good!" sighed Ruth, and her face, upturned to his caress, was full of tender reverence. Then, as he bent his head to hers, there came a sound of heavy feet, padding through the chalk dust of the old road, running down from the city gates.

"Ruth!" a voice called, hoarse and breathless, "Ruth!"

"Here am I," cried Ruth, a thrill of dread in her voice. "What is it—my mother?"

"Nay, not thy mother." The runner, a stalwart youth of the village, whose home stood close to that of Ruth, came up, and looked pityingly at her white face. "'Tis a bitter task to be the bearer of bad news," he said, addressing himself to Zerah, as if thus to lighten the burden of what he must disclose, "but some one must tell her."

"Go on," said Zerah, his arms tightening around the girl's half-fainting figure.

"'Tis her father. He fell from the roof, where he was mending the tiles. His weight on the ledge was too heavy. He went down, and a tile, following, struck his head with its jagged edge."

"And he is dead!" shrilled Ruth, in agony, "my father—my father—he is dead!"

"He was not dead when I left him, but a few minutes gone," answered the youth, compassion-

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

ately. "If we hasten, thou mayest yet hear his blessing."

Bending, Zerah lifted the girl's slight figure in his arms and was off up the road, running swiftly, past the old well, past the watchman at the city gates, past the rows of staring, pitying neighbors, never slackening his speed until he put Ruth gently down beside the couch where her father was stretched, his face already grayed with the touch of death.

"Father!" the girl sobbed, frantically, "father!"

From the colorless cheeks the black lashes lifted, slowly, and the eyes of the dying man looked deep into the eyes of his daughter with a gaze of infinite trust.

"Thou wilt stay with thy mother always, until death shall bring her to my care again?" he whispered.

"Always, my father, will I be beside her, so long as she shall live," vowed the girl, fervently.

"Now shall my soul depart in peace," murmured the man's lips, and spoke no more.

It was the tenth day after the death of Ruth's father that she came to Zerah, as he waited by the old well, in the cool of the evening with a strange, new anguish in her eyes.

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

"I have that to say which is most grievous," she faltered, "yet must I tell thee, though it break my heart and thine."

"Nay, nothing can break my heart and thine, so long as we may see each other daily, and the love in our souls abideth," he declared, tenderly.

"Ah—my Zerah!" She broke down, utterly shaken with grief, and he comforted her until the torrent of her tears subsided, and she spoke, with forced calmness.

"Thou knowest that my father was a poor man, Zerah. And now that he is gone we have nothing on which to live. Even the little cottage where I have spent my life is not our own."

"Thou knowest that thy mother can live with us in the khan," Zerah interrupted, but she shook her head sadly.

"Wait. When my brother came down from Galilee to attend my father's burial, he tarried here, as thou knowest, and still abides with us. He hath filled my mother's head with a plan which is as death to me, but against his strength my will is as nothing."

A quick foreboding chilled Zerah's heart, but he spoke quietly. "And what is this plan?"

"He would take us back with him to his home, which is on the farthest border of Galilee. There

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

he hath a wife, and a fine, rich home, and he will care for us in great comfort. O, he talketh with fine words! In a sumptuous litter will my mother be conveyed, and we shall have all that women's hearts can desire, he promises. He is my mother's eldest child—her only son—it is no wonder that in her grief and desolation she turneth to him."

"No—it is little wonder," conceded Zerah. "But thou wilt stay with me, my beloved. Let thy brother care for thy mother—it is fitting. Thou wilt be my wife and abide with me."

"But to that my mother will not listen, my Zerah! All day she moans and sobs, declaring that she cannot part from me—and yet she will go! Thou heardest my father's dying charge—thou heardest my vow to him. Help me, my beloved, for I must keep my trust."

For a long time Zerah was silent, his eyes looking out across the peaceful valleys, his face pale with the struggle of his soul. At last he spoke, and the buoyancy of his tones was dead—his voice was strangely lifeless.

"Yes. Thou must go," he said, "but thou wilt be faithful. It is a long journey, and I can leave my mother but seldom, but sometimes I shall see thee—and thou wilt send me a message—"

But Ruth was sobbing, in wild, choking grief

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

such as he had not seen even when they bore her father to his tomb.

"I cannot see thee, nor hear from thee, nor send to thee any message," she cried, piteously. "Always hath my brother hated thee, since the day when thou didst take the prize on which he had set his heart and bore the trinket off in triumph while all the village laughed at him."

"'Twas but a boyish game—surely no man holdeth such a childish thing in his heart," he protested; but she shook her head sadly.

"He is so proud and unforgiving. That thou so much younger than himself, should triumph over him before us all was a bitter humiliation to him. Through all the years he has not forgotten. Now he sayeth that unless I promise to give thee up, never to see thee nor to hear from thee, he will have naught to do with me."

"But thy mother—surely she will consider thy love and mine?" exclaimed Zerah, hotly.

"Ah, she is stricken with grief, crushed with her loss. With fine words he beguiles her: he hath my welfare at heart—he persuadeth me for my good—he wishes me to make a rich marriage—and she believes. Blame her not; she is a widow, and he is her only son."

"To thy mother is thy duty, but not to thy

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

brother," said Zerah, after another pause, and the lines of his face had become of a sudden deep-graven and stern. "Go with thy mother—but sometimes thou shalt see me and hear of me when he knoweth it not."

Over the girl's tear-drenched face flickered a look of intolerable pain, but her eyes met her lover's bravely.

"If my promise is given, it is given, my beloved," she said, and in the trembling of her tones there was no weakness. "If my promise is given to my brother and I go with him—and methinks it must be so!—then I will neither see thy face nor hear thy voice until the time of my vow is fulfilled."

And in the steadfast truth of her eyes, the man read the doom of his heart's desire.

Silently, his arm encircling her, they walked to the gates of the city, where the watchman drowsed and all was peace. There they parted, with only the pitying stars to witness their souls' anguish.

"I shall wait for thee, though the years be many," he whispered, and turned away, lest his spirit fail utterly.

"And I for thee," her clear voice made response, echoing softly in his heart as he walked, tear-blinded, down the path to the old khan, where his own duty claimed him.

CHAPTER VII

"AND I for thee!" The words reechoed in Zerah's heart, while the days grew into weary weeks, lengthened into months, and stretched into interminable years. And with each passing year Zerah's lips set a trifle more firmly, the lines of his face grew deeper, his eyes held a shade more of wistful sorrow. Yet the grave voice was ever gentle and the sad eyes were always kind. And when the starlight lay bright on the hillsides, as he kept the watch by the old gates, his sad eyes lighted with a glow that was half memory, half expectancy, and his head lifted as if he listened for a voice which should some time speak.

At first, on the calendar of the passing years one stood out radiantly now and then, because it brought some bit of news about the silent sweet-heart in far Galilee. Some traveler from the northern country had seen her, even spoken with her! Once a maid of Bethlehem, returning from a visit to kinsfolk in Galilee, came to Zerah and with womanly understanding told him, without questioning, of the things he longed to know.

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

"She is fairer than ever before," the maiden said, "but she is quieter, and her laughter comes but seldom. In the finest house in Capernaum is her home, and all her apparel is of the finest linen or of lustrous silks. And it is whispered everywhere that her brother would marry her to a rich man of that land, who openly admires her, but she will have none of his fine speeches or his gifts."

"Dost think she is happy?" So sharp was the anguish in the man's question that the maiden's eyes filled with quick tears as she replied:

"Happy? No more than thou art, Zerah. Women can read women's eyes, and I know that hers spoke loneliness and bitter yearning. Yet when I questioned her, because I had it in my heart to bring thee news, she said that her brother is kind to her, and that his care for the mother is beyond reproach. But when I ventured to ask her, 'Wouldst send a message to anyone in Bethlehem?' her eyes ran over with tears as she said, 'Only my love and blessings to all who remember me, for my heart changeth never toward those of my homeland.'"

But now, for ten long years, no word concerning Ruth had come to Zerah's ears. It was rumored that her brother had removed with his family to Bethsaida. Others said that the new

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

home was in Nain, and still others would have it that he had gone far north, into one of the strange cities of Phœnicia. Wherever she dwelt, no word concerning her came to Zerah's ears, and at times his heart was chilled with the fear that death itself had claimed her, ere her vow was fulfilled.

The Feast of the Passover was at hand when Nabor came down to the old khan just as the evening meal was finished.

"To-morrow thou must go up to Jerusalem," he said, "to observe the holy feast. I will stay with thy mother and do all that is required in thy absence."

"But always thou also hast gone up to Jerusalem," Zerah demurred.

"But always thy mother hath been well, so that for the time she could be left with the serving men and women. Now she is far from her strength, and it is fitting that I, the elder, should remain with her. Since thy grandfather sleeps beside thy father, it is for me to take his place. The young men should go up to the feast—it must be so! There should the strength of Israel assemble, that those who hate us shall not say, 'See, they are a feeble folk—a race that is dying!' But rather shall say, 'Behold their increasing numbers and their great strength!'"

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

So, with a tender farewell for the feeble mother whose hair was all of silver now, Zerah made his way once more across the valleys and up the hills toward the Holy City. And as he went the sweet meadow grasses, the green, rustling thickets, the splash of mountain streams, even the gray way where the cliffs were barren, sang to him of the night so long ago, when a girlish form beside him made the familiar way a path of radiance.

Yearly, he had come up to the Temple to keep the Feast. Yearly, his eyes had searched the throngs, hungrily, for two figures: Ruth, the sweetheart of his boyhood; and that other one—the little babe in the manger, the sturdy youth in the Temple, who was now a man grown.

In through the gates of the Holy City he hurried, straight toward the Temple Area, where the marble terraces gleamed whitely and the sunlight flamed on golden roofs. But as he would have passed into the sacred inclosure, a rough voice coming from one of a group of men who were idling about the entrance, caught his attention and he paused, listening.

“Men say that he is the Saviour—the promised Messiah!” the man declared, emphatically, “and of a certainty he doth marvelous things which no man can explain.”

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

"He is a trickster—a clever impostor!" cried another, contemptuously. "He turneth water into wine—he maketh the lame walk freely—faugh! Have not countless men arisen who by sorcery and magic could sway the multitudes?"

"Of whom do they speak?" Zerah asked a quiet man who stood on the edge of the group.

"Of a preacher who hath come out of Galilee, where he hath much fame. He showeth wondrous signs and doeth marvelous deeds, they say. The whole country is aroused to curiosity—and when curiosity is aroused, men as well as women prate and argue and make much vain talk."

"But who is he?" Zerah queried, eagerly.

"Who is he? 'Tis every man's question. How should I know? There are some who call him John the Baptist, others say he is Elijah, or Jeremiah, or Moses himself come back to lead his people. And others declare that he is an impostor, as I have told thee."

"I tell thee that he is the promised one—the King who shall deliver Israel!" shrilled an excited voice in the crowd, and while some applauded his words, others shouted in derision, "A king, indeed! He looketh like a great king! And doth not the Scriptures say that the promised one shall come out of Bethlehem? That he shall be of the village

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

and family of David? This man cometh out of Galilee—his mother lives in Capernaum, in a humble cottage. A great king, indeed!"

"Ah, he is a Galilean, then?" Zerah's voice was full of disappointment. For a moment a great hope had leaped to his eyes, but it died as the man nodded assent to his words.

"For a moment I thought that it might be he—that 'the time' of which Mary spoke had come!" he thought, and turned again toward the gates of the sacred inclosure. But he drew back instantly with an exclamation of joyous surprise.

Out of the Temple gates a man had stepped—a young man, clad in the ordinary garb of a north-country peasant, walking with the free grace of one whose feet knew long acquaintance with the open country roads. With him was a cluster of other men, plain men of the hills and the lakesides—farmers, shepherds, fishermen. But Zerah gave no heed to the companions. His eyes were fixed on the face for which he had sought so long—the face of the babe in the manger, of the fair-haired youth in the Temple, of the man whom he had so longed to see!

"Ah, it is he—it is he!" Zerah breathed ecstatically, but before he could reach the little group a crowd had closed around it. He heard a

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

confusion of voices, some raised in accusation, some answering in angry defense.

"If thou art indeed the Messiah, show us a sign," yelled a coarse voice, and the rest took up the cry, "A sign! a sign!"

Over Zerah's puzzled mind swept a wave of swift comprehension. This was he of whom they had spoken—the man of wondrous deeds, of marvelous preaching, whom men doubted because he came from Galilee, instead of from Bethlehem!

"Ah, they know not that he was indeed born in the City of David!" he thought, and began to press his way through the crowd. "I will bear witness—I will tell them of his birth and of the wondrous star, of the angel songs and the wise men and of Herod's wrath against him. Then will all men know that he is indeed the promised King of Israel."

He gained the side of him whom he sought, and his hand clutched eagerly at the coarse robe, his voice thrilled with vibrant joy, as he exclaimed: "I have found thee, at last! And I can testify that thou art no Galilean born, that thou art no impostor! I can tell all men—"

But his speech was checked by a silencing hand that touched his lips gently. Into his face gazed eyes that were clear and luminous, fraught with an

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

intensity of feeling which kindled in Zerah's heart a flame of love and loyalty and burning, unquenchable zeal.

Gone the impetuous desire to acclaim his wonderful knowledge; gone the eager anxiety to voice his thoughts; gone all impatience and impulsive, unthinking ardor. Before the calm patience and serenity of that countenance Zerah bowed his head in humbleness, his lips voicing the one thought of his soul.

"Master, I would serve thee. I would speak or be silent as thou wouldst have me. Only let me follow thee whithersoever thou goest."

"I have not forgotten thee, Zerah of Bethlehem. Keep in thy heart the things which thou knowest. These who believe not in me, would not believe though thou shouldst testify with the tongue of a prophet and the voice of an angel."

"But I may follow thee?"

"And what of thy mother who waits in the old khan? What of thy father's charge which thou hast kept so faithfully until now?"

A look of pain, of puzzled indecision, crossed Zerah's face. Hesitantly, his eyes met the Master's, seeking help.

"My father waited and longed for thy coming, as all the men of our race have waited and longed

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

throughout the years," he faltered. "Thinkest thou that he would not have me follow thee?"

Over the Master's face a tender smile flickered and his voice came softly clear:

"Thou shalt follow me—but the time is not yet. Thou hast thy charge—keep it faithfully. Ponder that which thou knowest in thy heart, and wait."

With his little band of followers he passed swiftly through the gaping men, who had listened, bewildered, to his words, held silent by an awe which they could not explain.

"Never man spake like this one," declared a swarthy husbandman of the North.

"And didst know that he healed a blind man at the city gates, this morning?" asked a vender from the East.

"And I know a man who with his own eyes saw one healed of palsy," cried a third.

"What knowest thou of him?" they demanded of Zerah, pressing around him curiously.

But Zerah, pushing his way gently through the clamoring crowd, went swiftly into the Temple, to partake of the holy feast with silent reverence.

CHAPTER VIII

"WHAT wilt thou do, Zerah, now that thy mother sleeps by thy father's side? The old khan will be lonely, and the inn will suffer, methinks, without a womanly hand to make it a place of rest and comfort."

They sat in the open courtyard of the inn, Zerah and his Uncle Nabor, and both faces were lined with the touch of a new, deep sorrow.

"Thou art the last of thy line," the uncle went on after a moment's silence, glancing pitifully at the trembling lips which had refused speech to the younger man. "'Tis fitting that thou shouldst marry, that a wife should brighten the old inn for thee, and that little ones should play on the old flagstones here, even as thou didst play in thy childhood. Already hast thou gone far past the time when men of our race marry—'tis not so that Israel's strength shall come."

"Dost remember Ruth?" Zerah asked, quietly.

"Yea, I remember. All through the years my heart has grieved for thee, though my lips were dumb, fearing that my man-speech would blunder

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

did I try to speak of thy disappointment. But hast heard of her? Dost know where she dwells?"

"It is ten years since news of her hath come to me," returned Zerah. "I know not where she dwells. Long ago would I have gone into the north countries and searched every city, had I been free to leave the khan. But now I may go, if thou wilt consent to my desire."

"If I will consent? Thou knowest that my heart desires thy happiness. But what wouldst have me do?"

"Live here in the inn, with thy family, while I go in search of my Ruth. All the business of the khan is familiar to thee. Wilt do this?"

The old man's face was a picture of doubtful tenderness, as he spoke slowly:

"But—I would not hurt thee, Zerah, nor throw so much as a passing shadow on thy hopes—but the years have been many, and Ruth was a young girl, lovely as a flower, with a manner that won the hearts of all who looked upon her. She hath not seen thee—nor heard from thee—nor sent thee any message—"

He paused, fearing to venture farther, but Zerah's voice came calmly:

"I know thy thought. Ruth may be another's wife these many years, thou thinkest. And I

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

could not blame her! But no man's wife is she, my uncle—that my heart knoweth. I have waited for Ruth, and she for me. If she liveth, her heart is mine, and I shall bring her to the old khan, for long ere this her mother hath gone to her rest, and the vow of my Ruth is fulfilled.”

“Surely such love and faith shall know its reward!” declared the old man. “I will stay here, and thou shalt go. But wilt thou go aimlessly up and down the land? What is the plan of thy going?”

“I have a plan which will surprise thee, methinks.” Zerah paused, as if choosing the manner of his telling, and Nabor's eyes showed strong curiosity before he went on slowly: “Dost remember the night, almost thirty years ago it was, when the angels appeared above the pastures, when the glory-songs rang in thine ears, when the shepherds came up to the gates in the starlight and I told thee that the babe lay in a manger of the old cave?”

“Aye, I remember. For a time we thought that it might indeed be the promised Messiah. But they disappeared with the babe. None knew where they took him, and we have never heard of him again.”

“I knew where they went. And but two months

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

ago I saw him, when I went up to the Passover Feast."

"Knew where they went? Thou wert but a little lad, when those things happened. And thou hast seen him again?"

Briefly, then, Zerah told his uncle of the mysterious man of Galilee, and the old man's eyes grew wide with wonder as he listened.

"And I love him, and my faith in him cannot be shaken," Zerah continued. "He is, indeed, the promised King. And I shall follow him. All his works and his preaching are done in the northern lands. On the shores of Galilee hath he wrought wondrous works of healing—at Capernaum, where his mother lives now, and Gennesaret, Bethsaida, and Gergesa—even Cesarea Philippi and the country that fringes Mount Hermon hath known his ministry. Wherever he goes, great multitudes flock to hear his words, and somewhere, as I follow him, I shall meet her whom I love. Was she not beside me when I first looked into his baby face? Was she not beside me when I saw him, a lad in the Temple? And I know that she shall, some time, stand beside me, in his presence again."

"Go, then, and may the Lord go with thee and keep thee," said Nabor. "Faithfully will we care for all thy possessions until thou shalt return to

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

claim thine own again. Dost know where to find him whom thou wouldst follow?"

"If I go up to Jerusalem I shall learn from his friends in what country he is working, for his deeds are on every tongue. Perchance he hath long since gone northward, for it is now two months since the Feast."

"I shall soon find where he hath gone—I will follow him with all haste," Zerah murmured, as he hurried toward the Holy City, his heart beating with joyous hope. Scarcely had he passed the Joppa Gates when he began to inquire of all whom he met, "Dost know where the great teacher of Galilee is to be found—he who doeth such wondrous miracles?"

"The Man of Galilee? The preacher whom some call the Nazarene, and some the King of the Jews?" laughed a Roman, presently, in answer to Zerah's question. "He is here in the city. Not an hour ago I saw him near the gates of the Temple, quarreling with some of his own countrymen. Methinks that you Jews have little reverence for your new King!"

"Ah, he is here! I shall not have to wait—I shall see him to-day!" exulted Zerah, hastening on without answer to the Roman's taunting jest.

Through the Temple gates he hurried, across

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

the white-paved court, along the grassy terraces, up the broad marble steps, until a murmur of voices in eager discussion led him to the colonnade known as Solomon's Porch.

"If thou be the Christ, tell us plainly," a voice rang out, as Zerah drew near.

"I told ye, and ye believed not," came a calm reply, and Zerah's heart leaped with joy. "It is the Master," he cried, and pressed nearer as the voice went on, "Ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. And no man shall pluck them out of my hand."

There was a murmur of angry voices, a sudden closing in of the crowd, and Zerah saw with terror that most of the men assembled had stones in their uplifted and threatening hands. Instantly, he shoved aside those who were in front of him, and pushing, elbowing, crowding desperately, forced himself to the side of the man who stood gazing with calm patience into the angry faces around him.

"Ah, Zerah, thou hast come!" There was no surprise in the clear tones, nor in the compelling eyes which gazed for an instant into Zerah's. "I expected thee. Now we will go hence, with these my disciples. Come."

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

Why did the angry mob hush its clamor? Why did the stones fall from the uplifted hands? Why did the crowd part, silently, to let them through? All these things Zerah asked himself confusedly, as with a little band of grave-faced, silent men, he followed the Master out of the Temple inclosure, through the city gates into the open country. But to all his wondering thoughts, his mind gave back no answer. He was conscious only of a joyous exaltation, a fervid desire to follow this man whose eyes and voice had called him.

On and on, walking swiftly and silently, the sun beating down whitely on the chalky roads, Zerah went, giving no heed to the way, knowing only that the Master led and he followed, until a pause by the roadside and the sound of voices around him brought his vague musings to a sudden close.

"Master, whither goest thou?" he heard a voice demanding. "Yonder lies the way into Galilee. Why turnest thou from the main-traveled road to this stony way which leadeth down to the Jordan?"

The little band stood on a hilltop. Beyond them a road wound pleasantly to the northward, where mountains towered cool and green against the sky. To their right, a narrow path turned off abruptly, descending a stony pitch toward a

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

river which gleamed sharply in the sunlight. And on the narrow path the Master had already set his feet and stood waiting.

"Across the Jordan would I go," he said. "We shall go no more into Galilee or the far countries of the North, for my time is short, and I have much to say to thee. In the pastures of Moab, on the edge of the desert, shall we abide, and I will tell thee of many things which thou must know."

No more into Galilee! Across the Jordan! On the edge of the desert! The words fell on Zerah's mind with cruel, crushing force. Not to go northward, where lay his heart's desire? Not to see the far cities where his hopes were centered? Not to search the vast throngs which crowded to the Master's teaching, and find among them, some day, the lost sweetheart of his youth?

There at the parting of the ways, with his hopes crashing down around him, Zerah stood, stunned, his eyes fixed on the distant hills where the green trees seemed to beckon. Always, in his thoughts he had held them both—Ruth, and the one who should some day stand forth as Israel's King. Never had his mind been troubled by the thought that he must choose between them. Together had they stood by the manger bed; together had they

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

found him in the Temple; together should they serve him in this new land to which the Master would lead him.

And now! There stretched the road to the Northland, and his fancy pictured a slender, beckoning maiden, her dark eyes promise-laden, at its end. And there, on the narrow path to the eastward, the Master stood, silent, waiting, while the rest of the band, without further words, picked their way down the stony trail.

"Zerah, lovest thou me?" Sadly, infinitely tender, the words fell on his ears, and he turned to the Master with worshipful, troubled face.

"Ah, Master, I would follow thee, I love thee!" he cried, and then, at the pitying touch of the Master's hand, his words gushed forth in a torrent of passionate protest and explanation. At last, calmed by the outburst of emotion, he lifted his head to find the luminous eyes regarding him with a world of tenderness and compassion in their depths. Yet the words that the Master spoke were softened by no loving phrase, no bright promise.

"I have need of thee, Zerah. Wilt follow me?"

Over Zerah's face flickered an anguish unutterable. Clearly before his tear-dimmed eyes floated the face of his sweetheart, shutting out the gaze of

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

the Master. But clearly, sweetly down the years floated a voice, low and gentle and mother-tender, "If ever he hath need of thee, remember thou wert the first to feel his touch."

Another look into those deep, compelling eyes, and Zerah, with a quick gesture of renunciation, turned his back on the northward road, and followed the Master down the steep path toward the river—the river, and the strange country, and the edge of the desert!

CHAPTER IX

DESOLATE, garish, sinister, the Hill of Golgotha shone in the white heat of midday like a polished skull, dried by the slow heat of centuries, but refusing to crumble into decent dust.

From the northern gates of the Holy City came the steady tread of thousands who hurried along toward this hideous hill, their eyes lifted to its bleak expanse with a shuddering fascination.

Half way between the city gates and the point where the road began its sharp climb up the hill-side a woman sat on a grassy incline in the sparse shade of a gnarled fig tree. Her face, half hidden by its drooping veil, was very pale; her hands, clasped convulsively against her breast, were thin almost to transparency, and the dark eyes, gazing so eagerly into the passing faces, held a glitter of feverish impatience and longing.

"I must not hope—I must not!" she whispered—and scanned the throng more eagerly.

Men and women and little children, of every race and every occupation. Nobleman and beggar, priest and layman, Pharisee and Sad-

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

ducee, in chariots, on horses, on camels, on foot. Laughing, weeping, groaning, singing, chanting prayers, bawling ribald jests—on and on and on, in endless procession. And still the woman sat motionless, her head bent forward, her strained eyes watching, watching.

“Hast lost some one in the crowd?” The voice, if rough, was kindly, and after one startled glance at the peasant woman who dropped on the grass beside her, panting, the dark eyes resumed their watching, unalarmed, while a rich voice answered simply, “I seek one who hath been lost to me for many years.”

“So?” There was a touch of compassion in the tones, a womanly pity in the glance that surveyed the slight figure, dressed with a quiet richness that spoke of wealth and gentle breeding. “Ah, well, trouble cometh to all, of whatever station. I myself have a wayward son whose feet have not blessed my threshold for many long years. And always, in a crowd, I look and look, until my eyes grow sore with weeping for his absence. But to-day my eyes are wet from another cause! ’Tis a shameful deed they do. What harm hath the gentle Nazarene done to any man?”

“Ay, ’tis frightful.” The woman’s frail form shook with sudden tempest of grief. “Who could

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

look in his face, hear his teaching, witness his marvelous deeds, and brand him an impostor? Some vengeance will fall from the heavens before this day ends."

"Thou hast seen him, then?"

"Many times. I have lived with my brother in the Galilean country and much of his ministry hath been there. I saw him heal lepers, demoniacs, the blind, and the dumb. I was present when he fed a multitude with five loaves and two small fishes."

"Aye—I doubt it not. His power is wondrous! No wonder that the rulers sought excuse to do away with him. I believe in the man—and yet, do not the Scriptures say that the Messiah shall come from the city of David?"

"In the city of David was this man born! I know it, for I myself saw him, thirty years ago, a little babe in a manger bed, in the old khan of Bethlehem."

For the first time, a look of distrust crossed the face of the peasant woman. She peered sharply into the burning eyes which had not ceased to scan the hurrying crowds, then shook her head and spoke soothingly, as one who humors a feverish fancy:

"Well, well, strange things are happening. I

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

must be on my way to the hilltop, or I shall find no place in which to see. Already the slopes of all the circling hills are paved with staring faces. 'Tis a holiday for the rabble as well as the rich. Wilt not come with me? I will steady thee along the way, for 'tis plain to me that thou art ill."

"I have been ill, but I thought myself strong again, until the horror of this overcame me. I could not bear to go nearer. From this bank the hill is not in sight. I thank thee for thy kind thought, but I will wait here. I can catch a last glimpse of the Master—and I can watch for my lost one."

"Didst ask the Nazarene for thy lost one?"

Over the woman's face came a look of hope and trust. "Aye, I asked him, and he said that I should find him some time, when the time had come! So, always I wait and watch, for the Master's word is true—but the time is so long!"

And now, down the road below them the din swelled into pandemonium, roaring nearer and nearer. Trumpets blared out, soldiers shouted harsh commands, and the voices of the rabble rose in frenzied clamor.

"They come!" cried the peasant woman, springing to her feet and peering through cupped hands. "I can see the soldiers' armor blaze in the sun—

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

they are almost here," and she was off, lost in the howling, circling mob.

Left alone, the watching woman rose, and stood leaning against the misshapen trunk of the stunted tree, her slender black-robed figure silhouetted sharply against the gray-green of the branches, her face death-white with an excitement sharply tinged with fear, as the awesome group which formed the reason for the mob marched steadily nearer.

Screaming, scampering children—shouting, racing men—shrieking, stumbling women—brown clouds of dust—sunlight blazing on burnished brass—Roman soldiers—a tall figure in the golden vestments of a high priest—more soldiers—more priests—more blazing sunlight and choking dust. Then, beaten, bloody, bowed with the weight of the cruel cross—the Master!

"Master!" cried the voice of the watching woman, so high and tense that it floated above the deeper tones of the mob, "Save thyself, Master, as thou hast saved others."

The bowed head lifted itself at her cry. For a moment the luminous eyes looked into hers. The next instant he stumbled, wavered, and sank beneath the unbearable weight of the cross.

"He can carry it no farther! Wouldst have

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

him die under the cross, instead of on it?" roared the captain of the guard, pushing aside those who were roughly striving to force the burden again upon the stricken figure. "Find me a sturdy Jew to bear the cross of his King!"

"I will bear his cross!" rang a voice above the jeering babble, and a man leaped forward to the Master's side, his head uplifted proudly, his broad shoulders squared for the burden.

The pale face of the watching woman blanched now to utter whiteness. Into her eyes sprang a great joy. She took one step forward, an eager cry trembling on her lips—but the cry was not uttered. A swift thought silenced her, and she drew back, dropping on the soft grass again, her face haggard and drawn, her hands clenched desperately, her eyes filled with resolute purpose.

"He follows the Master—I must not cry out to him now—I must not—I must not!" she moaned, softly.

"Begone—there is no sport in a willing cross bearer!" the captain exclaimed, pushing the volunteer aside, impatiently. "Here is a worthy son of Israel to bear his King's cross."

They had seized a foreign Jew, upon whose struggling, protesting form they bound the awful burden, with yells of derision. Again the proces-

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

sion took up the wild surge toward the hilltop, the momentary interruption forgotten, while the woman held herself tensely on the grassy bank, straining her wistful eyes after the tall form which strode sturdily on, close beside the Master.

"Perhaps he will come back this way!" she whispered, sobbingly, "but though I lose him forever, my voice shall never call him from the Master's side!"

Long she sat there, her face ghastly pale, her eyes dark with the horror of the hour, picturing the scene on the hilltop, beyond her vision. Suddenly she lifted her head and gazed around with a startled cry.

"A haze gathers across the skies," she gasped. "'Tis dark on the hills beyond the city—the Temple towers scarcely pierce through the mist—the road to Golgotha is blotted out!"

She was on her feet now, peering anxiously, trembling before the approach of this weird night which came in the midst of day.

The mist was gloom—the gloom was darkness—the darkness was thick, black night! A wind shrilled through the branches—the gnarled trunk of the old tree creaked, groaned, and split asunder, as if some giant hand juggled the round earth on a broad palm.

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

"'Tis the power of the Master!" breathed the woman, unafraid, and her face was as a white flame in the darkness.

As suddenly as it had gone, the sunlight broke forth again and the earth was at peace. Far up the road the tread of the multitudes began. Voices floated down to her faintly.

"It is over—the people are turning homeward—he is dead!" the woman groaned, bowing her head in utter grief, forgetful even of him who might pass with the returning throngs.

Down the steep road the mob streamed, their faces pallid, their bold voices hushed in the fear that had fallen upon them, whispering of the strange darkness and the awesome trembling of the earth. But the woman sat unheeding, her face buried in her hands, her form shaken with sobs, until a voice spoke, close to her side.

"I see that thou art in deep grief, and all alone. Wouldst let me help thee toward thy home?"

It was a man who spoke—a man who had stepped out from the hurrying crowd, and stood looking down at her, pityingly. But the pity in his eyes turned to startled amazement as the woman, at sound of his tones, lifted her head, and sprang up, a cry of joy on her lips, a radiance of joy on her face, a glory of joy in her eyes.

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

"Zerah!" she whispered, her hands outstretched to him, "Zerah—my beloved!"

On and on hurried the procession, eager for the familiar safety of their homes after the long horror of the day. But on the grassy bank Ruth and Zerah sat side by side, hands clasped, lips silent, eyes meeting eyes in the language that needs no words.

The last stragglers had trailed by when Ruth spoke, and her words were not of their love, nor of their long separation, but of the Master.

"Ah, why did the people suffer this deed?" she wept. "There are thousands who believe—why did they not rise and save him?"

"He would not have us fight for him," said Zerah. "We were ready, but he forbade, and we bowed to his command."

"And now he hath gone from us forever," she said sadly.

"Forever? It may not be so," said Zerah, and Ruth, looking up at him quickly, was surprised at the rapture and exultation which shone from his countenance.

"What meanest thou?" she questioned.

"Across the Jordan I followed the Master, with a little band of the faithful ones. There for

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

a time we sojourned in the pastures of Moab, on the edge of the desert, and there the Master told us many things. Often he spake in parables, and I, who had been so short a time with him, could not understand all that he meant. But more than once he talked of his death, and always he spoke of the third day thereafter. To me his words, however I pondered them, could mean but one thing—that he should come back to us on the third day!”

“Come back again—from the tomb? It could not be!”

“Nothing is impossible to him,” declared Zerah boldly. “I know not why he suffered this shameful death—but of this I am persuaded, that he hath in his hand all power, even over life and death, if he will but use it! With my own eyes I saw him, in Bethany but a few days since, bring forth from the tomb, alive and well, a man who had lain there dead for four days!”

“Ah-h!” Ruth’s eyes blazed with excitement, “if he should come back from death itself, even the high priests would believe, methinks!”

“Yes, but I saw him suffer such torture, when he might have saved himself with a word. If I could understand! But only one thing is certain—the Master hath gone from us!”

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

"Be comforted," whispered Ruth; "where is thy faith?"

"Thou art right," he smiled. "Let us go hence!"

"But—but whither goest thou?" asked Ruth, a shy tremor in her tone.

"Ah, in my grief for the Master and in my joy at finding thee, I have asked not a question concerning thee," he cried, in quick contrition. "Now tell me of thyself, and where thou hast been through all the years."

"Of myself there is little to tell. It is seven years since my mother went from us, and all that time my brother hath kept me with him, now in this city, now in that, for his trade calleth him from place to place. Always was I watched—I could not go to thee, nor send thee any word. I could but wait and hope. Never was I allowed to come down to the Passover Feast, but at last I fell ill and was near death, and my brother repented so far as to vow that if I lived I should come up with him to this feast. And so, but three days ago, weak and small of strength, I came to Jerusalem, and this morning, ere the dawn broke, I slipped from the house and came up here that I might watch the throng, praying fervently that I might see thy face."

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

"And thou hast seen my face, and I have seen thine, and nothing shall take thee from my side again," declared the man, and the woman's eyes gave glad assent.

"I know a woman who dwells near by, on the Bethlehem road," Zerah said, after a moment's thought. "She is Mary, the mother of James, one of the Master's followers. There will we abide quietly for three days, for I would not leave the Holy City until that time hath gone by."

Three days of peaceful rest, of quiet communing, of long talks in which all the years with their burden of love and longing were unrolled and scanned with eyes which shone through a mist of tears. And on the morning of the third day, very early, they walked hand in hand across the dewy fields, and took the road which led to the garden wherein lay the crucified one.

"Thou art not too weary?" he asked, and she laughed, turning to him dark eyes in which glowed a light of joyous strength and vigor.

"I am ill no more," she said, "for the longing of my heart is at rest, and with peace cometh strength."

"It is but a little farther," he said, fondly. "I know where the spot is—'twas whispered to only a few where they laid him, lest his enemies do mis-

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

chief there. But James hath told me that Joseph of Arimathea secured the body and laid it with all reverence in his own tomb."

"Let us hasten, lest others be there before us. I would stand by his tomb in quietness for a little while," urged Ruth.

Full dawn broke over the world as they stood at the gate of a garden of tombs, not far from the grim place of death. For a moment their eyes sought the eastern skies, whence a glory of sunlight poured, flooding the hillsides and touching the towers of the sleeping city with points of rosy flame. A breeze sprang up, and the air was suddenly heavy with some sweet, vague perfume.

"'Tis the breath of the lilies," said Ruth, turning to the garden and peering through the open gates with awed eyes. "See, the paths are bordered with them—how tall and white they are, and how golden their hearts!"

Down a winding path, where the lilies stood like fair white sentinels, they walked softly until Zerah paused, his hand on Ruth's arm, his eyes a blending of hope and apprehension.

"Look," he said, pointing, "there at the right, just beyond that group of lilies, is the door of the tomb. And 'tis the third day since they laid him there—the third day!"

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

Hands clasped, faces pale with emotion, eyes wide with an undefined expectancy, they circled the guardian lilies and stood before the door of the tomb. For a single instant they gazed, then their eyes met in joyous rapture.

The heavy seals were broken, the guarding stone had been rolled away, and around the open door a light played softly—a soft, shimmering radiance which was not of the morning sun.

Unafraid, they moved nearer, until they stood within the circle of light, their faces bathed in its glory, their heads uplifted, listening breathlessly, confidently, for the voice of their hearts' desire.

The soft light quivered, warmed, brightened, enwrapped them in a dazzling mantle of whiteness, shutting out all sight, all sense, save of the luminous, enfolding glory.

Then, a touch on their heads as of hands, warm and strong and infinitely gentle; a voice, deep and tender and angel-sweet, as if the shimmering light burst into speech:

“Thou hast not forgotten, neither hast thou doubted. Through all the years thou hast each been faithful to thy earthly father's charge and thy heavenly Father's service. Now unto thee and unto thy seed forever shall be long life, and joy, and peace in the blessed land of Bethlehem.

ZERAH, A TALE OF OLD BETHLEHEM

The radiance softened, wavered, hovered lightly over the bowed heads, and floated upward, blending into the morning mist. The two who stood by the open tomb turned away, their faces illumined with joy unspeakable, and followed the path through the fair garden, out of the open gate, into the shining trail that wound across the hills toward Bethlehem.

PS
3531
E77
Z4

Perry, Montanye.

Zerah; a tale of old Bethlehem, by Montanye
New York, Cincinnati, The Abingdon press [191

106 p. front., plates. 19^{cm}.

1. Jesus Christ--Nativity--Fiction. I. Title.

332160

CCSC/ef

Library of Congress

Copyright A 411473

PZ3.P4329Z

